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ABSTRACT

Despite the fact that a majority of urban educators remain optimistic about the future of city schools, urban high schools face significant challenges. Many recent developments in high school reform have important implications for career and technical education (CTE) programs in urban high schools. Publications on reforming secondary education contain recommendations about ways that urban educators can meet the unique challenges facing their schools. The following are among these recommendations: (1) create small communities for learning; (2) contextualize teaching and learning; (3) immerse students in the adult world; (4) maintain high standards; (5) provide options for further education and training; (6) connect and collaborate; (7) use different forms of assessment; and (8) provide for professional development. Strong connections exist between CTE and the current recommendations for high school reform. CTE practitioners in urban areas can use the current reform efforts to their advantage in the following ways: (1) supporting small learning communities with a career focus; (2) using contextual, project-based teaching and learning; (3) clearly articulating CTE outcomes and linking them to existing standards; (4) providing strong pathways to postsecondary education and further training; and (5) connecting to the community. (Contains 12 references.) (MN)

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In Brief
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by Susan Imel

Career and Technical Education in Urban Schools

In a recent survey, 85% of urban education leaders were "optimistic" or "somewhat optimistic" about the future of city schools (Lewis, Baker, and Jepson 2000). Despite this sense of optimism, urban high schools face significant challenges such as the following (American Youth Policy Forum 2000; Casserly 2000; Maxwell and Rubin 2000): inadequate and deteriorating facilities, including overcrowded classrooms; teacher quality and shortages; low student achievement; an environment in which student violence, truancy, drugs and vandalism prevail; and dropout rates as high as 50-60%.

Although the typical teacher in urban high schools is white, the student body is increasingly diverse in terms of race and culture. During the 1980s, the number of white, urban high school students changed from a majority of 54.5% to a minority of 45.4% (Maxwell and Rubin 2000). Urban high schools enroll a disproportionate number of minority and low income students: 33% of the nation's African-American students, 30% of the Hispanic students, about 25% of the Asian population, and nearly 25% of the students eligible for free lunches (Casserly 2000). The growing demographic diversity among urban high school students has not particularly led to diversity within schools, however: white urban students still attend schools that are predominately white and African-American students attend schools that are primarily African-American (Maxwell and Rubin 2000).

The challenges facing urban schools are particularly troublesome for career and technical education programs. "Urban public high schools...are often heavily criticized for producing students who cannot meet the knowledge and skill requirements of the labor market" (ibid., p. 15), but the current environment in many urban school districts does not support the development of effective career and technical education programs. Recent developments, however, are paving the way for changes in both urban high schools and career and technical education, and "in urban districts, educational reformers are increasingly looking to school-to-career approaches not just as a pedagogical approach but as a lever for change across the school" (Steinberg, Cushman, and Riordan 1999, p. 45). This ***In Brief*** examines developments in high school reform and highlights their implications for career and technical education (CTE) programs in urban high schools.

High School Reform

A number of recent reports and publications have examined secondary education with the goal of changing and reforming high schools. Although not all of these reports focus on urban high schools or career and technical education, many contain similar recommendations about what should be done to reform high schools:

- **Create small communities for learning**. Creating smaller communities of teachers and learners within large schools has the advantage of personalizing schools for young people. Small, personalized learning communities allow a group of teachers to work with the same students over a number of years. Learning is more individualized and teachers come to understand the needs of each student. Students are able to connect with caring adults and be part of a peer group. For many youth, the importance of strong relationships with caring adults cannot be underestimated (American Youth Policy Forum 2000; Kazis and Kopp 1997; Lewis 2000; ***The New Urban High School*** 1998).

- **Contextualize teaching and learning**. Traditional methods of instruction are not motivating for many students because they do not see the relevance of what they are expected to learn. Making learning relevant to students means connecting it to their needs and interests and actively engaging them in the learning process. Contextualizing teaching and learning not only has the advantage of motivating students through applied learning but it also leads naturally to the integration of academic and career and technical education (American Youth Policy Forum 2000; Copa 2000; Lewis 2000; Steinberg et al. 1999).

- **Immerse students in the adult world**. Exposing students to the world beyond the school, including the world of work, is an important aspect of contextualizing teaching and learning. Students should have opportunities to work with adults other than teachers in community and work settings. Teachers need to teach in settings other than the traditional classroom (American Youth Policy Forum 2000).

- **Maintain high standards**. In many schools, the movement to raise standards has created an emphasis on traditional academic standards. Connecting learning to the world of the students, however, does not mean that high standards should not be maintained. By eliminating distinctions between academic and career and technical, schools can create new frameworks for students with the expectation that they will all achieve high standards. Schools that have done this have seen increased numbers of students taking demanding courses (American Youth Policy Forum 2000; ***The New Urban High School*** 1998; Steinberg et al. 1999).

- **Provide options for future education and training**. Changes in how high schools are structured are designed to create more options for future education and training. Rather than narrowing choices for youth, the goal is to create programs in which all students master challenging academic standards and career-related competencies. Upon completion, they can advance and succeed in postsecondary education and career employment (Kazis and Kopp 1997).

- **Connect and collaborate**. Collaboration both in and out of schools is an essential part of restructuring efforts. The community plays a strategic role in a school's ability to create connections between learning inside and outside of its walls. It can serve as the site of service learning projects and work-based learning opportunities such as internships. Community members can assume the important role of mentoring youth. Connecting with and involving parents and continually assessing community needs are also critical factors in achieving reform (American Youth Policy Forum 2000; Copa 2000; ***The New Urban High School*** 1998; Steinberg et al. 1999; Wermuth, Maddy-Bernstein, and Grayson 1997).

- **Use different forms of assessment**. Contextualized, authentic teaching and learning methods call for forms of assessment beyond the typical standardized tests.

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Unfortunately, the standardized tests designed to assess traditional subject matter rarely move beyond testing students' knowledge toward assessing their ability to retain and use that knowledge in different settings (Steinberg et al. 1999). Assessments that allow students to demonstrate that they understand how to apply what they have learned are more appropriate for contextualized teaching and learning environments. Assessments should also be used on an ongoing basis to determine how well students are learning the material, and teachers should use the results to modify how they are presenting material (American Youth Policy Forum 2000).

• **Provide for professional development**. Changes in expectations related to teaching, assessment, and making connections to the community call for professional development. According to Lewis (2000), "the research literature is quite clear about high-quality professional development. It focuses on student performance, makes expertise and resources available, is consistent over time, encourages teachers to experiment and reflect, and is designed to address the needs of teachers within their own schools" (p. K14). An example is the Met School in Providence, RI, where professional development follows a "plan, implement, and reflect" cycle, immersing all teachers in the school's development (American Youth Policy Forum 2000).

Implications for CTE

Strong connections exist between career-technical education and the current recommendations for high school reform, some of which have long been hallmarks of excellent CTE programs. Career and technical educators can use the current reform efforts to their advantage in urban areas in the following ways:

• **Supporting small learning communities with a career focus**. Urban school districts are large and tend to have many high schools within them. These schools have the potential to become the sites of smaller educational environments that are fundamental to high school reform (Grubb 1995). Career clusters, career academies, and tech prep programs are all appropriate vehicles for creating the small learning communities that are the foundation for high school reform (Brand 2000). These are all forms of CTE that are compatible with other elements of high school reform.

• **Using contextual, project-based teaching and learning**. Many career and technical educators are already familiar with and use contextualized teaching and learning approaches in their classrooms. Urban students, who may not see the adults in their lives rewarded for hard work, are not usually motivated by extrinsic means such as grades and discipline and uninteresting tasks may seem pointless to them. For them, contextualized teaching and learning are especially important because their interests and backgrounds are taken into consideration (Grubb 1995).

• **Clearly articulating career and technical education outcomes and linking them to existing standards**. Rather than establishing separate standards, career and technical education should link to whatever standards are part of the larger system (Brand 2000). These linkages should clearly articulate what is expected of students who participate in CTE and demonstrate how students who achieve them will meet or exceed the systemwide standards. The goal should be to perform at a level of proficiency and mastery that opens multiple career options to participants (Kazis and Kopp 1997). By eliminating the distinction between academic and vocational, New Urban High Schools held all students to high standards while offering them the support necessary to be successful (*The New Urban High School* 1998).

• **Providing strong pathways to postsecondary education and further training**. Closely related to the need to link to the prevailing standards is the need to ensure that all students are able to advance and succeed in postsecondary education or other training required for long-term career employment (ibid.). At the William Turner Technical High School in Miami, all students take an integrated academic and vocational program of study in one of seven broad career academies and all graduate with both the academic preparation for college and the experience and certification to enter a career path (Steinberg et al. 1999).

• **Connecting to the community**. Communities have an important role in urban education. Many urban communities, for example, have a rich social, economic, and political life that can be used by schools to support real-world learning (Grubb 1995; Steinberg et al. 1999). Connections with urban employers can pay off in work-based learning opportunities for youth. Urban communities can be the site of service learning and community projects that are an important part of contextualized learning (Steinberg et al. 1999).

In urban districts, career and technical educators should be at the forefront of high school reform. The recommendations for high school reform involve systematic change, including restructuring, but career and technical education has much to offer in helping make high school an experience that will provide all youth the foundation for future education and training and multiple career options.

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